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SCEPTICISM AND FAITH IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PASCAL

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The neglect of Pascal by the English-speaking world today is little short of amazing. Within the last decade France has produced literally scores of studies of his life and thought; but, with the exception of a book by St. Cyres and an essay by Paul Elmer More, there has been scarcely a sign that we were conscious of any special relation between the spirit of our own age and that of this seventeenth-century genius. Yet Pascal is indeed a man of the present, and a study of his multiplex personality has never been more pertinent than it is today. Geometrician, experimental physicist, biting satirist, literary artist, keen-sighted moralist, devout believer, philosophical sceptic, man of the world, ascetic recluse, the problem of the balance and inter-relation of these selves is still waiting a completely satisfactory solution. How was it that the geometrician and experimental physicist could be a pronounced supernaturalist? How was it that the almost cynical man of the world could become the devout recluse? What relation can we find between the sceptical doubt of the possibility of knowledge and the obedient acceptance of the dogmas of the church? With what consistency could the rationalistic critic of Jesuit morality be the challenger of all philosophic creeds? How could all these conflicting interests keep house together in the same frail tenement and present the semblance of a unified life? Perhaps they could not, and his death in his fortieth year was the outcome.

But while these problems are still pressing for solution, the present essay makes no profession of having solved them all. Its problem is to interpret the meaning of Pascal's religious thought in the light of his personal experience and with reference to its significance for ourselves. Even this attempt is ambitious enough to invite failure; yet whether it succeeds or not it may at least serve to call attention to the problem and the man.

Blaise Pascal was born at Clermont-Ferrand in Auvergne, the 19th of June, 1623. His father, Étienne Pascal, was a judge, president of the *Cours des Aides*, and the descendant of a long line of men prominent in the administration of the country. His mother is said to have been very pious and very clever, but she died when Blaise was only three years old, leaving himself and two sisters, Gilberte, born in 1620, and Jacqueline, born in 1625, the former of whom was to become her brother's biographer and the latter his confidante and counsellor in religious matters.

Étienne Pascal was no ordinary man. He was keenly interested in the new scientific movements of the age and had views on education. These latter determined him to conduct his son's education himself, and accordingly, in order to satisfy his own interests as well as to give his son the best opportunities, he sold his position and moved to Paris in 1631, where he formed one of a distinguished group of mathematicians, whose informal organization later developed into the *Académie des Sciences*, and which included such men as Roberval, Fermat, and above all, Mersenne. In an atmosphere charged with scientific activity the young Pascal was educated entirely by his father and after his own plan. It seems to have been an extremely informal type of education and to have consisted largely in intellectual stimulus, furnished, perhaps unfortunately, mainly at meal-times and immediately

thereafter. The boy was asked questions on things in general, and encouraged to work out his own answers and make his own experiments. Fearing the all-absorbing fascination of mathematics, the elder Pascal planned to postpone the study of these until his son's fifteenth year, so that he might not be drawn away too early from the study of language and literature. Accordingly he began by giving him some general suggestions as to the function and value of grammar, and then in his twelfth year proposed that he should take up Latin. But genius was too much for him. Blaise had had his interest roused in mathematics and demanded instruction therein, which his father promptly refused, locking up his own books to enforce his decision. Nothing daunted, however, the young inquirer amused himself in his hours of recreation with working out his own conceptions, until one day his surprised father found the walls of his playroom covered with demonstrations which corresponded with the first thirty-two propositions of the first book of Euclid. The boy had devised his own axioms, definitions, and proofs, even though the names of the figures were as yet unknown to him. Upon this his father capitulated, and Blaise was introduced to mathematics in a formal way. Four years afterwards he delights his father's scientific circle by the production of a work on conic sections, in which he carries still further the method recently invented by Desargues for the treatment of that subject—a method as yet incomprehensible to many of the older mathematicians of the day. The work established at once his reputation as a mathematical genius, and he took his place among the older men of the intellectual aristocracy as a recognized equal.

Nor was his interest confined to pure mathematics. From his early boyhood he seems to have had an interest in physics, having written a childish treatise on sound, pronounced by his impartial family a remarkable

production for a boy of his years. And oddly enough, as well as significantly enough, his reliance in his investigations seems to have been upon experiment and observation rather than upon mathematics simply. Recognizing in pure mathematics the ideal of logical reasoning and delighting as he did in playing its fascinating game, for the attainment of real truth he looked to the slower but surer method of experiment. The model for his investigations was not the brilliant rationalistic physics and metaphysics of Descartes, but the more sober and empirical method of Galileo and his like. Geometry was delightfully certain, but by itself it was not adequate for the investigation of nature. This early conviction of his—that the truths of physics are of a less degree of certainty than those of mathematics—we shall see later developed into his recognition of the uncertainty of all human knowledge when tested by the ideal of absolute demonstration.

The effect of this intense intellectual activity upon the constitution of Pascal was bad. He had never been a robust child. When a year old he suffered from some unknown trouble which baffled the physician, until it was traced to the evil influence of an old woman of the neighborhood; whereupon, at her suggestion that life must be given for life, a cat was flung out of the window, some herbs applied, and a cure effected. But all through his life Pascal gave evidence of a nervously disorganized constitution, attributed by his sister to his excessive intellectual labors, and at any rate fostered by them. He seems to have been at all times eager and impatient, quick at retort, apt to offend, yet always by his generosity and penitence retaining the friends he sorely tried. Wit he had in abundance, but the humor which goes with the easier nature and relieves the strain of life he lacked. Life for him was tense and serious even in his ridicule of human folly and false pretension. The gospel of

relaxation had not yet been preached with effect. He seems to me in these early years like a dog, keen and alert, with an ear for every sound, but with as yet no unity of purpose or fixed philosophy of life.

What his religious life was during this period we have scanty means of knowing. We have, however, the very significant statement of his sister that in spite of his intense intellectual curiosity he had always limited it to things natural, regarding the truths of religion as outside the field of human reason. This attitude he told her he had taken from his father, who from his earliest years had impressed upon him the principle that "whatever is the object of faith cannot be the object of reason, much less subordinate to it." There seems not the slightest ground to suspect that he was ever tempted from this position, although some have tried to establish the fact, but that, to use his sister's phrase, throughout life, "in all the things of religion he remained as submissive as a child." Certainly in his earlier years physics and mathematics furnished a sufficient outlet for his intellectual energy, leaving his emotional life to express itself in the traditional pieties of his inherited religion. And even in his later years, when he was forced to busy himself with theological problems, it was the practical significance of these rather than their theoretical value which absorbed him. In all which he was a serious representative of that convenient division of territory common in late scholasticism by which were rendered to the scientific Caesar the things that were Caesar's and to the God of religion the things that were His.

That this ingrained respect for the truths of religion meant anything more for him in his youth than a refusal to make them the subject of critical study, is doubtful. Indeed, the manner in which, after his conversion, he deplores his early absorption in worldly knowledge seems to indicate at that period no divided allegiance, but a

complete absence of the intense emotional life which characterized his later years. The whole of his vital energy was going into his intellectual pursuits and it was in all probability the over-strain of this life that conditioned his later conversion.

In 1640, when Pascal was seventeen, the family moved to Rouen, his father having been given a government position there as intendant. The seven years of his life there are marked by two events—the invention, after many trials, of Pascal's arithmetical machine, and the conversion of the family to Jansenism. The former is significant of the universality of Pascal's genius, which found expression not only in the field of pure theory but in that of practical invention as well. It is true that the machine was not perfect, but it was workable, and was the ancestor, I suppose, of the homely cash register. It is to Pascal also that Paris owes its first public omnibus line, the idea of which arose from his desire that the poor of the city should share in the motor privileges of the rich. His venture was a great success, even women, his sister Gilberte writes, daring to use the coaches.

More significant, however, was the conversion of the entire family to the austere type of religion represented by Jansen and the leaders of Port Royal. Pascal is reported to have been very zealous in the new faith and to have stimulated the devotion of the others, especially that of his younger sister, Jacqueline, who in consequence wished to take the veil. There is some doubt, however, as to the real depth of his conviction, and I am inclined to feel that this first conversion was largely a matter of the head rather than the heart, and that Pascal's interests were still more in right thinking than in Christian living.

At any rate, his scientific work was being pursued with unfailing devotion in spite of increasing physical disorder, which, from his eighteenth year, left him no day without

pain, and in the summer following his conversion resulted in almost complete collapse—a violent and prolonged neuralgia, partial paralysis of the lower limbs, inability to swallow save drop by drop—apparently a case of intense neurasthenia. Yet just before and even during this period Pascal was engaged in the solution of the physical problem which has placed his name high on the list of genuises in physics. This was the mystery of the vacuum and the nature of atmospheric pressure. The problem, and even the suggestion of its probable solution, he inherited from his older contemporaries, Galileo and Torricelli, but it was wholly due to his own picturesque imagination that we have the convincing and spectacular proof of the theory furnished by the measurement of the height of the column of mercury in a vacuum at the base and at the top of the mountain near his home, the Puy de Dôme.

The significance of this experiment, as Pascal recognized, is not to be found merely in the particular truth established by it, but much more in its contribution toward the theory of scientific method. It meant the triumph of the experimental method over authority and superstition.

Though this experiment on the Puy de Dôme was the most spectacular of Pascal's achievements in physics, it was not his only one, nor perhaps even his most important one; but into his later investigations in hydrostatics and his discovery of the principle of the hydraulic press we cannot go.

During the course of these experiments Pascal had come up to Paris, largely on account of his health, and thence, upon the advice of his physician, had given up his studies and gone back to his former home at Clermont for a year. But he was not really at home in the country, so that in 1650 we find him again in Paris, entering upon what is usually known as his worldly life.

Just how worldly these next few years were, we do not know, nor even the motives which led him into the special life of the day. It is probable, however, that in his forced abstention from severe study and in his inability to find amusement in country life, he tried the pleasures of the Paris salons as the most attractive distraction possible to him. And that he found a real distraction in them at first there can be no doubt. It is true that he found in them few intellectual equals, but it is true also that he found in them men and women of intelligence and charm interested in playing the social game upon a high level—interested not merely in amusing themselves but in making of social life a serious profession. For it was the middle of the seventeenth century, the period when society was organizing itself in France, the period of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, of Mlle. de Scudery, of the *Précieuses*, and, while the talk was not profound, it yet involved ideas and implied an atmosphere of refinement which, while perhaps formal, yet made of intercourse a thing of art and beauty. That a brilliant young man of twenty-seven should find the game distracting is not surprising, and we have not to invoke his philosophical interest in experience to account for his four years of social life, though it is true that these years gave him much material for his later thought.

That Pascal did not remain wholly an alien in this society is perhaps indicated by his having been moved during this time to write an *Essay on the Passions of Love*, a rather formal composition, but one whose minuteness of detail seems to argue experience rather than hearsay. “A woman,” he writes, “is the highest form of beauty. Endowed with mind, she is its living and marvellous personation. If a beautiful woman wishes to please, she will always succeed. The fascinations of beauty in such a case never fail to captivate, whatever

man may do to resist them. There is a spot in every heart which they reach. . . . The pleasure of loving without daring to say anything of one's love, has its pains but also its sweetness. With what transport do we regulate all our actions with the view of pleasing one whom we infinitely value. The fulness of love sometimes languishes, receiving no succour from the beloved object. Then we fall into misery; and hostile passions, lying in wait for the heart, tear it into a thousand pieces." Who this "marvellous personation" of beauty was we do not know, but that she was a reality and that she may have been Charlotte de Roannez, the sister of his friend the Duke, are guesses which have something in their favor. It may perhaps be also true that a hopeless passion for one above him in rank had something to do with his weariness of the world and his retreat to Port Royal, but the writing of imaginative soul-history is not a profitable occupation.

The turning-point in Pascal's life came in his thirty-second year. Up to this time he had been the eager, unresting thinker and man of the world. Life had stimulated and entertained him. It had offered him endless subjects for his boundless curiosity. Wherever he turned, problems had presented themselves and opportunity had been given for intellectual play. But as yet life had been all play, and play, even scientific play, loses its zest in time, save for those gifted with unbounded energy and unreflective minds. And these latter gifts were not Pascal's. Nervously broken down and worn out with his intellectual activities, life began to pall upon him and to force upon him the fatal question, "To what end?" His reply was his conversion and retreat to Port Royal.

Much legend has gathered about the facts of his conversion, of which this story told by Bossuet is at the root: "One day in the month of October, 1654, when he went

according to his habit to take his drive to the bridge of Neuilly in a carriage and four, the two leading horses became restive at a part of the road where there was a parapet, and precipitated themselves into the Seine. Fortunately, the first strokes of their feet broke the traces which attached them to the pole, and the carriage was stayed on the brink of the precipice. The effect of such a shock on one of Pascal's feeble health may be imagined. He swooned away, and was only restored with difficulty, and his nerves were so shattered that long afterwards, during sleepless nights and during moments of weakness, he seemed to see a precipice at his bedside, over which he was on the the point of falling."

That such an accident as this may have contributed to his conversion is quite probable, but that the change had been long in preparation, his sister's account of his talks with her makes very evident. Of his visit to her in September, 1654, she writes to her sister Gilberte: "At this visit he opened himself to me in such a manner as moved my pity, confessing that in the midst of his exciting occupations and of so many things fitted to make him love the world—to which we had every reason to think him strongly attached—he was yet forcibly moved to quit all; both by an extreme aversion to its follies and amusements and by the continual reproach made by his conscience. I confined myself to watching his mood without attempting unduly to influence him; and gradually I saw him so growing in grace that I should hardly have known him. I believe you will have the same difficulty, if God continues His work; especially in such wonderful humility, submission, diffidence, self-contempt, and desire to be nothing in the esteem and memory of men. Such he is at present. God alone knows what a day will bring forth."

What the day did bring forth was only the persistence of this changed life. He retired from the world, first to

a house in the country, and then to the quiet valley of Port Royal, where he joined himself to the Solitaries and lived their life of ascetic routine. Henceforth the occupations in which he had formerly delighted knew him no more; geometry, physics, society, all intellectual activity —these he put behind him and counted as nothing, so that he might walk the way of humility and self-denial. Nothing more significant of his change of attitude can be found than this passage in a letter to the mathematician Fermat: “To tell you the truth, I think geometry the finest training the human mind can have; but at the same time it seems to me so useless, that I scarcely trouble to distinguish between a geometer who is simply a geometer and a clever artisan. It is the finest trade in the world, and nothing more than a trade—excellent, as I have often said, for us to try our wings on, but not fit to be the object of our flight. For my own part, I would not walk two steps for geometry, and I fancy you are very much of my opinion.”¹

Port Royal des Champs, to which Pascal had retired, had been a convent of Cistercian nuns founded about the middle of the thirteenth century in a wooded and marshy valley eighteen miles west of Paris. Its celebrity dates from the accession to power of Jacqueline Arnauld, appointed abbess at the age of eight and known officially as *La Mère Angélique*. Entering upon her duties at the age of eleven and converted six years later, she came under the powerful influence of St. Cyran, and succeeded in transforming her convent from a home of luxury and dissipation to a centre of the highest religious life. In 1635 the nuns removed to Paris, and there settled in the valley the group of remarkable men known as the Solitaries or hermits of Port Royal, men who had taken no monastic vow, but who had renounced the world and dedicated themselves to the life of piety and

¹ Letter of Aug. 10, 1660.

self-denial. Some, who formed the nucleus of the band, lived wholly in the valley; others, among whom was Pascal, came and went as need dictated. Their names are familiar ones in the history of French literature and philosophy—St. Cyran the leader, three nephews of the Mère Angélique—Lemaistre, de Saci, and Robert Arnauld d'Andilly—Pierre Nicole, and above all, the most celebrated of the Arnauld family, the youngest brother of the abbess, Antoine Arnauld.

Upon the return of the nuns in 1648, the brotherhood retired, some to Paris, and some to the farm on the hill-side known as *Les Granges*. Their mode of life was simple. “They wore no distinctive dress. Their wants were supplied by the barest necessities in the shape of lodging and furniture. From early morning—three A.M.—to night, they were occupied in works of piety, charity, or industry. They met in the chapel after their private devotions to say matins and lauds, a service which occupied an hour and a half, after which they kissed the earth in token of a common lowliness, and each sought his own room for a time. The Gospel and Epistle were read daily, and sometimes during or after dinner the Lives of the Saints. They dined together; and a walk thereafter formed the sole recreation of the day. Two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon were devoted to work in the fields or in the garden by those who were able for such tasks. Confession and Communion were frequent, but no uniform rule was enforced. In this, as in fasting and austerities generally, each recluse was left to his own free will.”²

But scholarly activities were not neglected by the brothers, and, under the general supervision of Antoine Arnauld, translations, books of devotion and polemics, came in rapid succession from the press. Of these the most famous is the series of letters professedly to a

² Tulloch's Pascal, p. 89.

provincial, known as the *Provincial Letters*, of which Pascal was the half-suspected author. Into the familiar story of this controversy, to which the *Letters* were the chief contribution, we do not need to go, for it throws but little light upon the development of his religious life. And yet it is true, none the less, that the battle with the Jesuits which Pascal really won with his *Provincial Letters* was part of the same campaign in which he contributed by his *Pensées* to a drawn battle. For it was against the worldly spirit of compromise, apparently necessary for a world-church, that the *Letters* were directed, and their effect was fatal for the whole system of Jesuit morality and easy accommodation to the desires of both flesh and spirit. And it was against the same spirit of fusion in respect to God and man, nature and grace, reason and faith, that his later and fragmentary work was an unconvincing argument. Jesuit morality never recovered from his biting ridicule, but men still hesitate to accept the "either-or" of his sharp disjunction and make their choice for nature or grace.

The *Provincial Letters* appeared in 1656-57, and were his last systematic work. That these, the most brilliant of his writings, appeared only six years before his death, is evidence enough, were any really needed, that Pascal's conversion was not the sign of intellectual senility. Indeed one is tempted to feel that his earlier scientific activity, valuable as we have found it to be, was yet after all merely a preliminary intellectual game, and that his true genius could only come to complete expression under the stimulus of religious passion. It was this that gave the unity of purpose, intensity of faith, sincerity of conviction, that were necessary to unite head and heart and make possible a work that should express the whole man.

But his powers ripened only to decay. Within two years of this controversy and perhaps largely as a result

of it, his old nervous trouble began to return, and all continuous intellectual labor became impossible to him. "But although his malady prevented his being serviceable to the public or his friends," writes his sister in her memoir, "it was not without use to himself; and he underwent it with such tranquillity and patience that there is reason to think that God by this means was pleased to render him just such as He would have him appear at the Last Day. For during all this long illness he always bore in mind these two great maxims: a renunciation of all pleasure and of all superfluity. In the very height of his distemper he kept a perpetual watch over his senses, absolutely refusing them whatever gave them pleasure. And when necessity constrained him to do something that might afford him some sort of satisfaction, he had a wonderful address in disengaging his mind from having a share in it. For example, his continual diseases obliging him to feed upon delicacies, he took the utmost care not to relish what he ate; and at the very beginning of his retreat he laid down stated rules concerning all his future meals." During these last years, he also wore next his flesh an iron girdle with sharp spikes which he pressed whenever he felt a tendency to pride or worldly pleasure.

"His charity towards the poor," his sister continues, "was always very great, but toward the end of his life he redoubled it. He said that it was the universal vocation of all Christians, and that there was no need of any particular mark to know if one had a call to it from above, because this was incontestably the very mark upon which Jesus Christ would judge the world." "About two months before his death he did a very remarkable work of charity. He had in his house a good, honest man, with his wife and family, to whom he gave a room and a supply of firing. . . . This good man's son falling ill of the small-pox, my brother, who needed

my assistance, feared that I should be under some apprehension of coming to the house. But, as he thought that the sick boy could not be moved without danger, he chose to leave the house himself, although he was so very ill. On June 19, 1662, he came to us, and returned home no more." "On August 19, 1662, at one o'clock in the morning, being of the age of thirty-nine years and two months," he died.

It was during the last four years of his life that Pascal jotted down the fragmentary thoughts which constitute his greatest gift to the world. Absolutely without form or finish, mere fragments of a proposed Apology for Christianity, these fragments make the eternal appeal of life to life. "*Les Pensées de Pascal*," says Vinet, "ne sont point un livre . . . elles sont Pascal lui-même, tout Pascal."³ It is to Pascal himself then, to this book of the *Thoughts* that we now turn, to see if we can discover the secret of the man and of his hold over men.

But when I say that his secret was just Christianity, it may seem as if I were denying his possession of a secret at all, for Christianity may seem too familiar and obvious a thing to be called by that name; but while unto the Jews it may be "a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness, unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks," it may be the power of God and the wisdom of God, and the mystery of its power and appeal in the case of Pascal is worthy of our examination.

And first, what *was* Christianity for Pascal? To put it in one word, Salvation. Its fundamental beliefs are two: "that there is a God of whom men are capable, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of him."⁴ Sin and God are thus the poles of his thought. "The whole of faith consists in Jesus Christ and Adam."⁵ It is the Pauline, Augustinian,

³ A. Vinet, *Études sur Pascal*, p. 13.

⁴ *Pensées*, 556. References are to the standard edition of Leon Brunschweig.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 523.

Calvinistic concept of Christianity—man created free and innocent, falling into sin through his own choice, his will thereafter wholly corrupt and incapable of choosing good, hopelessly lost, so far as his own powers were concerned, since he could not even will to will the good. This is the Christian doctrine of man. On the other hand, there is the revelation of a personal God, all-powerful, wise, and loving, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and will save all those who put their trust in Him. The Christian message for Pascal is essentially the same as that on the banners of the Salvation Army—“Jesus saves”; it is the message of sin and salvation, of bondage and release.

But the *Thoughts*, as I have said, were part of a proposed Apology for Christianity, and we must ask what evidence then Pascal brings forward for the truth of these traditional doctrines, what was the character of his argument, on what grounds did it appeal to him? In the eighteenth century, Bishop Butler in England published his apology for religion under the ponderous title, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*. Pascal's work might well have borne a similar title, though it would have read, *The Analogy of the Christian Religion to the Constitution and Course of Man*, for his aim is to show by an analysis of human nature that Christianity is just the kind of religion which fits in best with the actual nature and needs of man. In its teachings man finds a mirror of himself; it reveals his desperate condition as no other religion or philosophy does, and at the same time it offers the only remedy possible for his case. His method is psychological and ethical, rather than metaphysical, and in this is partly to be found the explanation of his appeal to the present. His question is direct and personally verifiable—“Is the Christian account of your condition true or not? If it is, is there any other reasonable relief save the

Christian?" Here are no scholastic subtleties or abstruse metaphysical reasonings; the appeal is to the individual's experience of sin and salvation. In this, Pascal's little book represents the prevailing tendency today to rest the argument for Christianity upon the evidence of Christian experience.

But it is not merely in his psychological method that the strength of Pascal lies. It is much more in the passionate earnestness with which he applies his method and in the vividness and incisiveness of his analysis, that we feel his power. Pascal is neither a closet philosopher nor a laboratory psychologist. His picture of human nature is neither telescopic nor microscopic. He does not take his stand outside of experience but speaks from within, with the passion and power of one who has himself felt all that he describes. For the *Thoughts*, though not in form confessions, like those of his master St. Augustine, are in fact transcripts of his inner life. He is himself the hero of his tale—the sinner, fallen, struggling for some good, redeemed by a power not his own. And to this desperate interest in the drama he describes is added a power of incisive as well as picturesque description rarely equalled. He might have failed in larger systematic construction, but in fitness of phrase he has no superior. Every word tells. There is no haziness or blurring of the figure, but we are brought face to face with ourselves, with every feature clear cut and distinct. It may not be all of life that Pascal presents, but it is at least life, and life in its intensity.

And what now does Pascal find man to be? A strange compound of grandeur and misery. A being raised above nature by virtue of his knowledge but rendered miserable by that which he knows. To quote the most familiar passage in the *Thoughts*: "Man is but a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary that the entire universe arm itself to crush

him. A breath of air, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But were the universe anxious to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which kills him, because he knows that he dies; and the universe knows nothing of the advantage it has over him.”⁶ Here speaks Pascal the intellectualist, the geometrician, the man of science. Far from contemning reason, he finds in it the peculiar glory and grandeur of man. Pascal may despair of knowledge but he does not despise it.

But when man, endowed with consciousness, turns it upon himself, what does he see? “What is man in the midst of nature?” he asks. “A nothing in comparison with the infinite, an all in comparison with nothingness; a mean between nothing and all.”⁷ “The greatness of man is great in that he knows himself miserable.”⁸ “Let us imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows, and wait their turn, looking at each other sorrowfully and without hope. It is an image of the condition of men.”⁹ “The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our head, and it is all over.”¹⁰

This is the note that recurs again and again throughout the *Thoughts*—the terrifying and paralyzing effect of consciousness. This divine attribute which raises a man above nature seems given only to crush him with the terrors it reveals. As he realizes the weakness of man and the brevity of his life, Pascal cries out, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.”¹¹ “Between us and heaven or hell there is only life, which is the frailest thing in the world.”¹²

It is to escape thought, to turn their attention away from their wretched condition, that men seek amusement

⁶ *Pensées*, 347.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹² *Ibid.*, 213.

and distraction. "Those who think men unreasonable for spending a whole day in chasing a hare which they would not have bought, scarce know our nature. The hare in itself would not screen us from the sight of death and calamities; but the chase which turns away our attention from these does screen us."¹³

Such is man, as Pascal sees him, a being of infinite possibilities, yet frittering away his time in a vain attempt to escape the consciousness of his own miseries. World-weary and self-weary he passes from excitement to excitement seeking in vain for an eternal good. But an eternal good is not to be attained by temporal powers. Herein Pascal sees the truth of the doctrines of Montaigne as against the teaching of the Stoics. Our human reason is not sufficient for the discovery of absolute truth nor are our human powers equal to the attainment of a real good. The Stoic ideal of a life in accordance with reason is a noble ideal, but all experience shows it as impossible of realization. We see the better, but we follow the worse. Man, as the Stoic sees him, is man in his original innocence and virtue, man before the fall. Man, as Montaigne paints him, is man in his present condition, ignorant, corrupt, and helpless. Both these views of man Pascal holds to be reconciled in the Christian theory, and in the Christian theory alone. It alone is psychologically sound and shows man his dual nature.

And this brings us to the remedy for human misery. As we have found already, this is Christianity with its doctrine of a loving God able to save all who put their trust in him. In finding God, man finds an eternal good able to satisfy his heart and quiet his restless search for distraction. The Christian God is the very God of peace.

But what ground is there for believing in such a God? What means have we for knowing truth? Here is the

¹³ *Pensées*, 139.

much vexed question of Pascal's scepticism. Does he or does he not believe in the possibility of knowledge? Does he or does he not preach blind faith and submission to authority? Does he or does he not give us a consistent account of truth? If one selects his quotations with care, one can prove almost any thesis about Pascal. It is easy enough to point out the familiar passages in which the impotence of reason is asserted as dogmatically as by a modern agnostic: "What is thought? How foolish it is."¹⁴ "The last attainment of reason is to know that there is an infinity of things that surpass it."¹⁵ "Nothing is so in conformity with reason as this disavowal of reason."¹⁶ Or read the scornful passages in which he ridicules all human laws and institutions as products of absolutely irrational custom. "Truth this side the Pyrenees, error that side."¹⁷ Or this ironical bit on the effect of conditions on judgment: "The mind of the supreme judge of the world [man] is not so independent as not to be liable to be disturbed by the least uproar that is made about him. . . . Do not wonder that he reasons ill just now; a fly is buzzing in his ear; it is easy enough to render him incapable of sound judgment. If you are desirous that he should find the truth, drive away that insect, which suspends his reasoning powers, and frets that mighty mind which governs cities and kingdoms. Here is a pretty god, indeed! *O ridicolosissimo eroe!*"¹⁸

But over against these gibes at reason we have to set the following: "We know the truth not only by the reason, but also by the heart. It is by the heart that we know first principles, and it is in vain that reasoning, which has no part in it, tries to combat them. The Pyrrhonists, whose only object this is, strive for it in vain. We know that we do not dream, however impotent we may be

¹⁴ Pensées, 365.

¹⁵ Ibid., 267.

¹⁶ Ibid., 272.

¹⁷ Ibid., 294.

¹⁸ Ibid., 366.

to prove it by reason: this impotence proves nothing more than the feebleness of our reason, but not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they pretend. For the knowledge of first principles, as of space, time, movement, numbers, is as certain as any of those that our reasoning gives us. And it is on this knowledge of the heart and instinct that reason must support herself, and on this she finds her whole procedure. . . . Principles are felt, propositions are proved, and all with certainty, although in different ways. And it is as ridiculous for the reason to demand of the heart proofs of its first principles in order to consent to them, as it would be for the heart to demand of the reason a feeling of all the propositions that it demonstrates in order to be willing to receive them. This impotence ought to serve then only to humble the reason, that would judge of everything, but not to combat our certainty, as if there were nothing but reason capable of instructing us. Would to God that, on the contrary, we never had need of it, and that we knew all things by instinct and feeling. But nature has refused us this good, and she has given us, on the contrary, but very little knowledge of this kind. All other knowledge can be acquired only by reasoning.”¹⁹

Here then we seem to have a sure foundation in principles which are the basis of all reasoning and which therefore are themselves beyond the demand for proof. The proof of everything else can’t itself be proved. These self-evident principles Pascal assigns to the heart rather than to the reason. Their certainty is immediately *felt*, not demonstrated.

But no sooner have we reached this firm ground than it begins to tremble under our feet. Pascal goes on to admit “that we have no certainty of the truth of principles, beyond faith and revelation, except the natural

¹⁹ Pensées, 282.

conviction of them which we feel within us. Now this natural conviction is not a convincing proof of their truth, since, having no certainty except through faith whether man was created by a good God, by an evil demon, or by chance, it is doubtful whether the principles thus given to us are true, false, or uncertain.”²⁰ It may be, as Descartes had suggested before him, that our faculties are not constructed capable of truth and that our most intense conviction is an illusion. We may be the spirit of a maliciously humorous demon.

Does the victory then rest with the sceptic? Yes and no. Rationally we have no logical grounds for our most fundamental truths—they are not reason-compelling—they are at best only convictions or beliefs, which we are powerless intellectually to defend. But, on the other hand, they are so firmly rooted in human nature that they need no defence.

However much the sceptic may point out the feebleness of our intellects and the dependence of our judgments upon custom and prejudice, nature will always prove too strong for him, and though we may assent to his arguments we shall disregard his conclusions. Instinct will triumph over intellect and life will demand faith. This is the essence of Pascal’s familiar saying: “Nature confounds the Pyrrhonists, and reason the dogmatists. Our inability to prove anything is such as no dogmatism can overcome, and we have an idea of the truth which no Pyrrhonism can overcome.”²¹ Not Hume nor James has better expressed the contrast between life and thought and the irresistible dominance of the former. Those whose “lives are sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” are bound to be replaced in the struggle for existence by those in the full tide of life and faith. Scepticism is but humanity’s momentary pause as it takes its breath and looks about preparatory to its new advance.

²⁰ Pensées, 484.

²¹ Ibid., 484.

Much has been made of the sharp contrast in Pascal between faith and reason and of the irrationality of his belief in Christianity; but the more one studies his general attitude toward knowledge, the less exceptional seems his attitude toward Christianity. Christian faith may be blind, but it is only to a degree blinder than other faith; Christian doctrine may be incapable of demonstration, but so in last instance is all knowledge. So far is he from admitting the irrationality of religion that he asserts it to be more certain than many of our common-sense beliefs. "If it were necessary to do nothing but for the certain, we should do nothing for religion; for it is not certain. But how many things we do for the uncertain, as sea-voyages, battles. I say, therefore, that it would be necessary to do nothing at all, for nothing is certain, and that there is more certainty in religion than that we shall see to-morrow. . . . Now when we work for to-morrow and for the uncertain, we act with reason."²² The irrationality of religion, for Pascal, is merely its lack of demonstration and compelling proof, but that it is reasonable in the larger sense of the term he insists again and again. Indeed, his proposed Apology for Christianity would have been an absurdity on any other assumption.

What has given currency to the idea of his irrationalism is the failure to recognize the distinction between logical validity of proof and psychological effectiveness in action. Pascal believes that the evidence for religion, while not amounting to demonstration, is yet stronger than that on the other side, so that probability is for it. But he also believes that this logical credit is not sufficient to induce practical acceptance and action, for it is not an affair of pure reason but of feeling, emotion, and will. The natural man resists religion, not because it is not probable but because he does not *want* to believe

²² *Pensées*, 234.

it and to act upon it. It is not enough to convince the reason; we must influence the will. And hence the passage which has outraged the intellectualists: "You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. . . . Follow the way by which they began—by acting as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will make you believe and stultify you. . . . It is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling-blocks."²³ Now whatever we may think about the particular efficacy of holy water and masses, Pascal's point here ought to be clear enough, that since religion is a matter of life and action, it is to be induced not merely by evidence but by appeal to will, and that therefore the essential preparation for it is the discipline of the life and the purification of the emotions. It is not against evidence that faith has to struggle but against pride and self-will. It is, in a sense, not so much irrational as involuntary.

And to this same truth, even Pascal's famous figure of the wager bears some witness, though it is usually cited on the other side. He "represents man as playing the game of life against inscrutable nature: heads, God exists; tails, he does not. On which shall we bet? There is compelling reason on neither side, it is an irrational venture. But if we choose heads and win, the rewards are infinite. If we lose, we lose comparatively nothing, for religion even in this life is profitable through its results in character and social success. If we choose tails and win, we gain only the fleeting pleasures of this life, while if we lose, we lose an eternal happiness. It is the part of wisdom therefore to bet boldly upon heads and the existence of God, for the risk is nothing and the gain may be infinite.

²³ *Pensées*, 233.

"Now one must admit that the idea of this religious gamble is not wholly attractive. And at first thought it seems to support the theory of the pure irrationalism of Pascal, for both moral and intellectual considerations seem ignored and everything put to the hazard of chance."²⁴ But one must remember both that this wager does not represent his true idea of the situation and that its point is to emphasize the practical considerations involved in religion. His contention is that *even if* the evidence were evenly balanced, as he believes it is not, still there are inducements which may be offered sufficient to incline the will in the direction of faith. Considerations of value may take the place of logical proof.

It is effectiveness, therefore, rather than truth which philosophy lacks. What men need is help, not knowledge. They need to be saved from their own weakness and viciousness, and this can only be done by the power of God renewing the will and enabling it to embrace the true and eternal good.

And this true good is conceived by Pascal wholly in an ascetic sense. It is to be found only in a complete suppression of the natural desires and an absolute submission to the law of the spirit. There can be no compromise with the world. Peace is to be obtained only through discipline, humiliation, fasting—the absolute suppression of the natural longing for happiness. The self must die in order that God may be all in all. Marriage he condemned as the "most perilous and lowest of the conditions of Christianity."²⁵ Even the delight in intellectual activities is a vanity not to be endured. Sickness is the true and proper state of mankind, since it involves a lowering of all the vital energies and makes pleasure impossible. Life as a whole is but a meditation upon death, as one cannot but feel as one

²⁴ Wilde, *The Pragmatism of Pascal*, Phil. Rev. XXIII, p. 546.

²⁵ Letter to Mme. Perier.

reads Pascal's own *Thoughts*. But it is only as one thus renounces absolutely the unsatisfying pleasures of the world, that one can find an eternal satisfaction in the love of God. To retain but a single natural desire is to have an enemy within the walls who will inevitably destroy this longed-for peace of death.

It is a stern creed for which Pascal stands, yet I cannot but feel that it is the natural expression of his character. Much is said by his sister and repeated by his biographers of the loveliness and lovingness of his disposition, and his charitable deeds are offered in evidence, and yet I doubt. The charity which characterized his later life is not, it seems to me, the charity of a loving heart, but the almsgiving of the penitential sinner. The value of the deed is felt to be in its mortification of the flesh, in its humiliation of the spirit, rather than in its relief of the poor. It is a duty, not an act of love, and its worth is proportionate to its difficulty rather than to its results. And hence Pascal was suspicious of organized charity or institutional endeavor, because it lessened this opportunity for individual self-discipline. The poor were spiritual laboratory material, the supply of which must never be exhausted.

And a careful reading of his *Thoughts* leaves us with the same impression. Of kindly, sympathetic interest in men, there is not a trace. Nowhere is his power greater and his wit sharper than in his analysis of human weakness and folly. He is a Montaigne, minus the human sympathy of that genial cynic. Again and again his personal scorn flashes out. "How I hate those who set up for doubters of miracles." "How I hate these stupidities," e.g. not to believe in the Eucharist. Human negligence "irritates me much more than it excites my pity." It is everywhere the impatient intellectual aristocrat, recognizing spiritually his nothingness before God, yet feeling intellectually his superiority to men.

He is a kind of Christian Socrates, conscious that he is as ignorant as others, but conscious too that his knowledge of his own ignorance puts him in a class by himself. With an over-developed intellect and an under-developed social self, his conversion makes him conscious of his social duty but never results in a generous love of mankind. They are to be cared for and served because it is unnatural, and therefore spiritual, so to do. Pascal's religion, in being non-human, tends to become inhuman, and expresses what I cannot but feel is an inhuman element in him.

But we must not leave Pascal with a criticism which may itself appear inhuman. Three aspects of his thought call for special recognition. Philosophically, Pascal's service consisted in his questioning of the validity of the rationalistic dogmatisms of the day, represented by the mechanical philosophy of Descartes. Such an intellectually necessary system of the universe is impossible. Demonstration has its limits, and above and underneath it lie what Pascal called the truths of the heart, incapable of proof and grounded in the non-rational elements of human nature—instinct, will, and emotion. By contrast with the prevalent ideal of mathematical demonstration such a contention seemed to the men of his time and perhaps even to himself sceptical, but measured by a less stringent standard we should be inclined today to call it empiricism and to invoke the name of William James as pledge of its respectability.

Theologically, this anti-rationalism meant the founding of religion not upon metaphysical arguments but upon faith, upon an act of will that is more than the conclusion of a syllogism. God is not demanded by our curiously inquiring intellects to complete our systematic scheme of the world. He is sought by our restlessly dissatisfied wills to give peace and steadiness to life. Mathematics and science could satisfy Pascal's love of knowledge;

he did not need to betake himself to religion for that. But mathematics and science could not fill his life, and it was to this end that he sought religion, not primarily for its truth but for its practical worth. And here again we may see foreshadowed the modern doctrine of the will to believe and the pragmatic value of religion, and in a form perhaps more reasonable than some forms in which it appears at the present day.

But it is in Pascal's appeal to the religious temper, or at least to one type of the religious temper, that his greatest significance is to be found. Like his saintly masters, Paul and Augustine, Pascal portrays with passionate intensity the eternal struggle between flesh and spirit out of which religion is born. Nowhere do we get more vivid pictures of the emptiness of life, of the nearness of death, of the tragedy of folly, than in Pascal. And nowhere is the natural helplessness of man presented with such desperate conviction as in Pascal. World-weariness is the mood he makes us see beneath the surface-happiness of every life. "Who will show us any good?", "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?", are the cries he makes us hear from the depths of every human heart.

Sainte-Beuve says of Jansenism, and by Jansenism he means this religion of Pascal, this Pauline conception of helpless man redeemed by grace, "La seule objection qu'on était en droit d'adresser au Jansenisme, c'était non pas d'être un hérésie, . . . mais c'était d'être un anachronisme."²⁶ And yet wherever we find men and women disappointed with the unfulfilled promise of the world, wearied and beaten in the unequal struggle with self, men and women in whom, from whatever cause, there has been awakened the fatal hunger for the eternal, this religion of Pascal will seem neither a heresy nor an anachronism, but the deepest truth of life.

²⁶ Port Royal, II, p. 534.